

RESEARCH IMPACT

Building community connections for disaster resilience

Discovering the benefits of community connections for resilience and disaster preparedness



“It’s been incredibly important to us...to frame for more vulnerable people how they can take responsibility and assist themselves in terms of their preparedness and resilience”.

Kath Harrison, CEO, Katoomba Neighbourhood Centre

Challenge

It’s everyone’s responsibility to be ready for emergencies, not just those working in emergency services. However, communities are made up of people with varying capabilities to take responsibility when disaster strikes. How do we improve resilience and disaster preparedness for everyone in the community?

Discovery

Typically, community service organisations which serve vulnerable sections of the community by supporting them to build day-to-day resilience, are not involved in disaster management. Associate Professor Valerie Ingham and Dr Sarah Redshaw have been researching the experience in the Blue Mountains following the 2013 bushfires. They found connecting community organisations and emergency services improves disaster preparedness and community resilience.

Impact

The success of the Blue Mountains experience in creating partnerships between community services and emergency services to plan and build emergency resilience has been seen in the impacts from action research and has been documented for the benefit of other communities.



**Charles Sturt
University**

Two Charles Sturt University researchers, Associate Professor Valerie Ingham and Dr Sarah Redshaw, have been researching community connections and documenting experiences in the Blue Mountains since the catastrophic 2013 bushfires. In partnership with community organisations and local emergency services, two projects were conducted. This research gathered key insights about the benefits of bringing together organisations involved in disaster management, including emergency services, councils and neighbourhood centres.

The first project, looking generally at community resilience and vulnerability, coincided with the 2013 bushfires. The results highlighted that even within a well-connected community, there were pockets of vulnerable people at greater risk in times of disaster.

In the second project, Charles Sturt University provided expertise to evaluate three fire awareness programs as they were rolled out across the Blue Mountains. In addition to making recommendations about the awareness programs, the research found that there is often a disconnect between emergency services and community service organisations. Creating connections between these groups opens opportunities to work together to benefit the community as a whole, including the most vulnerable members, in emergency preparedness and resilience in disasters and daily life.

Community impacts from action research

This program of research featured participatory action research or ‘learning by doing’. In this case, community organisations, emergency services and Council were involved in the research, with the aim of improving the way they go about building resilience and preparedness in the community. This means that impacts were seen during the research itself.

The second project evaluated three fire awareness programs as they were rolled out in various communities across the Blue Mountains by partnerships between the organisations involved. The organisations were able to see the benefits of working together. By reaching out through community organisations, emergency services can reach more people with the preparedness message. By working with emergency services, neighbourhood centres can support their clients to be more prepared for emergencies. The networks and working partnerships established through the research are continuing in the Blue Mountains.

Some of the big impacts in preparedness included:

- More than 700 households in the Blue Mountains were reached across the three preparedness programs;
- An increase of 29% of people reporting that they were actually prepared for an emergency, including an 11% increase in people having a written plan to deal with an emergency;
- A 19% increase in people actually practicing their fire and/or emergency plan;
- A 17% increase in people having an emergency kit accessible; and
- 14% more people had made contact with their neighbours.

Community resources

Following on from the research, a range of information resources have been developed by the community partners, utilising the capabilities and networks to create and distribute easily accessible information. The main information resources include:

The Get Ready! Guide – a practical guide for the community sector in the Blue Mountains.

Useful information for emergencies – a one-stop booklet for the general community of the Blue Mountains with phone numbers, addresses, websites and other information for emergencies.

BSAFE 5 points for seniors to prepare for emergencies – a quick reference guide for seniors and others to plan for emergencies in advance, and to help them respond if an emergency does happen.

Recognition in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly
Trish Doyle, MP, referred to the research in a Community Recognition Statement in the NSW Legislative Assembly. Ms Doyle highlighted that, in the BSAFE project, “a unique partnership emerged between community services and emergency services”. She commended the project, anticipating that there would be long-term benefits for other communities. The full transcript can be found in the NSW Parliament Hansard records.



“Building resilience...reaps benefits in times of disaster”
Associate Professor Valerie Ingham

Blue Mountains City Council Ageing Strategy

The findings from the first project informed the Blue Mountains City Council 2017-2027 ageing strategy. In the draft strategy, the research was acknowledged directly under the theme of social participation. There are a number of parallels between the recommendations from the research and the list of actions in the strategy to address social isolation and associated issues. These include catering for housebound seniors, making cultural and other community events more accessible, and exploring partnerships with other organisations to provide recreational, leisure and social opportunities for older people.



“Originally, we thought we’d have one program that we ran in the preparedness and resilience space for the whole of the Blue Mountains. But what the research showed us...was that actually they each met a different need with a different population group...we’re now running all of them”.

Kris Newton, Manager, Mountain Community Resource Network

Program Highlights

- Connecting key players in emergency management – emergency services, local council and community services.
- Partnerships using complementary strengths to build community preparedness and resilience to disaster.
- Creation of preparedness resources for every household.
- Supporting services to deliver immediate responses in emergency situations.

More information about the research can be found in the BSafe and Community Connections reports at:

<http://www.kncinc.org.au/publications/>

Community resources available from:

<http://www.mcrn.org.au>

Funding and Collaborators

This research involved two separately funded projects. Project 1 was funded equally by Charles Sturt University, Blue Mountains City Council, Katoomba Neighbourhood Centre Inc., and Springwood Neighbourhood Centre Cooperative Ltd. Project 2 was funded by the NSW Ministry of Police and Emergency Services Community Resilience Innovation Program. Collaborators from all of these organisations, as well as other emergency services, community organisations and council contributed to this program.

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